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ABSTRACT

A study investigated differences in native and non-native French speaking teachers' patterns of error correction of second-year students' compositions. Subjects were eight university teaching assistants (TAs), four native speakers of French and four non-native speakers. Data were drawn from photocopies of all students' corrected compositions (n=220) on a common topic, with common essay parameters. Analysis of marking and teacher comments on the essays focused on differences in the number of corrections by different TAs, categories of errors corrected, and attention paid to essay content. TAs also completed questionnaires and were interviewed concerning their error correction procedures. Results indicate that both native speakers and non-native speakers attended carefully to all error categories (verb, noun, spelling, pronoun). While most of the TAs stated that they graded compositions on both grammatical accuracy and content, none made any comments about whether the essay was interesting or not, original or unimaginative, or well or poorly organized. Implications for TA preparation, error correction, and classroom instruction are examined. Questionnaire and interview questions are appended. Contains 12 references. (MSE)

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Comparing Native and Nonnative Speakers' Error Correction in Foreign Language Writing

CATHERINE A. JOLIVET

The purpose of the study reported here was to determine whether or not there were differences between native and nonnative speakers/instructors of French when they corrected second-year students' compositions. The data for analysis consisted of students' compositions which were corrected and returned to them. The subjects of the study were teaching assistants (TAs) at a large state university. The methods used were both qualitative and quantitative. In order to examine the differences between native and nonnative speakers of French, a MANOVA was run. The results indicated that there were no significant differences between the two groups in the number of errors corrected nor in error categories. Native and nonnative speakers alike showed a lack of interest in the content of the compositions. It appeared that nonnative speakers of French were as capable as native speakers of identifying and correcting students' mistakes. Implications from the study point to several areas in need of further research, such as TA preparation specifically as it involves error correction and the teaching of writing in the foreign language classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Compositions have typically been the most common types of assignment given to foreign language students. Instructors usually correct the compositions mostly for their **grammatical content**, sometimes neglecting the ideas, creativity, and originality of their more **individual and personal content**. Moreover, instructors typically offer systematic formats for correcting grammatical errors. For example, if a student turns in a composition about last summer's vacation (in order, no doubt, to verify the use of the past tenses in French), the instructor corrects the grammatical aspects of the composition, and gives it back to the student, who reads his or her grade and puts the composition away for good, never to look at it again. Since it is now known and recognized that recognized that the best possible way to learn a foreign language is to do so in context, it does not make much sense to teach writing as an isolated act.

For the most part, beginning and intermediate level college language classes are taught by teaching assistants, the majority of whom are not native speakers of the target language. Some researchers found that corrections performed by nonnative instructors differ from corrections performed by

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native speakers (Heilenman, 1991; Davies, 1983). It appears that nonnatives feel more comfortable correcting grammar than they do meaningful content. They also tend to correct more mistakes than natives do. The present study proposed to examine the differences that existed between native and nonnative speakers of French when correcting intermediate students' compositions. The researcher's hypothesis was that there would be differences in the number of errors corrected by native and nonnative speakers. Specifically, that nonnative speakers will make more corrections.

This study will answer the following three research questions:

1. Are there any differences in the number of corrections performed by native and nonnative speaking instructors of university intermediate French classes when they evaluate compositions?

2. Are there any differences between native and nonnative speakers in the categories where error correction was performed?

3. Are there any differences between native and nonnative speakers when and if they paid attention to content?

BACKGROUND

Several studies conducted in student written production established the background for the present study. Green and Hecht (1985)[1] conducted a study comparing native and nonnative evaluation of learners' errors in written discourse. Their purpose was to establish categories, causes and gravity of errors, and to examine differences in native and nonnative assessment of them. Results of the Green and Hecht 1985 study showed that more than half the errors recorded were grammatical in nature and that errors were caused by a variety of possibilities. As far as error gravity was concerned, results demonstrated little agreement between graders. Therefore, it can be said that, overall, German graders were the most severe in the category of grammatical errors. Natives were more influenced by meaning in their judgment of error gravity. German graders focused more on form, and consequently communication of meaning was somewhat secondary and often simulated.

Kobayashi (1992) conducted a study investigating how native speakers of English and native speakers of Japanese at professorial, graduate, and undergraduate levels evaluated ESL compositions written by Japanese students. Two compositions (A and B) were written by two Japanese students and were evaluated by 269 subjects, all of whom were in language related disciplines (some were undergraduate students, some graduate students, others were professors). There were 145 native speakers of English and 124 native

speakers of Japanese. The subjects were assigned either composition A or B and asked to evaluate them for the following: grammaticality, clarity of meaning, naturalness, and organization, using a 10-point scale.

Findings were analyzed in four areas. The first was grammaticality. Overall, Japanese subjects of all academic levels evaluated both compositions more positively that did the English native-speaking group. For both compositions, the higher the academic status of the groups, the smaller the differences were between English and Japanese subjects. Among the English native-speaking group, the higher the status, the more positive were the rating for both compositions. Among the Japanese native-speaking group, the ratings varied widely for the two compositions. In composition A, the Japanese graduate students gave the most positive evaluations, whereas the professors gave the most negative. In composition B, the findings were reversed.

In the area of clarity of meaning, when comparing native speakers of English and Japanese with the same status, English native speaking professors and graduate students gave more positive evaluations than did the equivalent Japanese speaking group. However, the Japanese undergraduates evaluated the compositions significantly more positively than did the English-speaking undergraduate students. Among the English native-speaking groups, the higher the academic status, the more positive the evaluation. This was not true for Japanese native speaking groups.

In the area of naturalness, if one discarded the graduate students' evaluation of composition B, native speakers of English were more rigid in their judgment than their Japanese counterparts. A possible explanation for the finding may be that native speakers have stricter criteria for naturalness in their language than do nonnative speakers, which in turn, may be explained by the fact that nonnative speakers have difficulty judging naturalness in a second language, whereas native speakers rely on their intuition.

In the last area of organization, English native-speaking professors and graduate students gave more positive evaluations for both compositions than did their Japanese counterparts. However, the Japanese undergraduates evaluated both compositions far more positively than the English undergraduate students.

Takashima (1987) examined to what extent nonnative speakers were qualified to correct free compositions. In order to investigate the issue, a Japanese university graduate who majored in English was asked to write a composition. A Japanese teacher of English and two native speakers of English, who were also college level teachers, were asked to correct the composition. The corrected versions were compared and the results showed: (a) that the nonnative corrected as many mistakes as the natives; (b) the nonnative modified the composition in a different

way from the native speakers, and sometimes to the detriment of original meaning; (c) the nonnative was relatively good at correcting mistakes in punctuation and spelling and (d) the nonnative's lack of knowledge of certain grammatical rules or proper usage had some effect on his/her ability to correct the composition.

In light of the above presented studies, it appears that native speakers are generally more competent than nonnative speakers when they correct compositions. It also appears that native speakers correct errors that affect comprehension and meaning, whereas their nonnative counterparts tend to be more grammar-driven in their corrections. The present study proposed to examine students' writing in context and to compare native and nonnative speakers of French when they evaluated students' compositions.

POPULATION AND PARTICIPANTS

The subjects were university students enrolled in all eight sections of third and fourth semester French at a large southeastern U.S. state university.

The group of instructors were eight teaching assistants in the Department of French at the same state university. Four were French native speakers and four were English native speakers from the USA.

DATA SOURCES

The researcher obtained photocopies of the first and final drafts of all the students' compositions which the TAs had already corrected, graded, and returned to the students. The semester compositions were all syllabus-assigned and the researcher chose the second written assignment. The compositions were collected only after they had been returned to the students so as to prevent the study from biasing the grades the students received, and also to guarantee that the instructors did not change their grading method for the purpose of the study. The topic of the composition was common to all eight sections of second-year French courses. The researcher did not inform the instructors of her desire to collect the compositions. She just made sure that they would be a mandatory assignment for all sections. Length of the composition was limited to one page, typed and double-spaced, thus allowing for control for handwriting discrepancies.

The deadline for turning in the composition was the same for all sections, so that students had approximately the same amount of instruction at the time they did the assignment. Even though some were in their third semester and others in their fourth, there were no significant differences in the written production of the third and fourth semester students.

SAMPLES

Once collected, the final drafts of the compositions were put in ascending order from lowest to highest score within each section, based

on the grade assigned by the TA. There were approximately fifteen compositions per section and there were eight sections in all, making a total of 220 compositions. They were placed in one of the following two groups: low (Cs and Ds) or high (As or Bs). The number of randomly selected compositions in each group and in each section formed the database for statistical analysis. Sixty-four (64) randomly selected compositions were analyzed.

METHOD AND DESIGN

Method

The research design incorporated both quantitative and qualitative procedures and sought to answer the three research questions (a) on differences in the number of corrections performed by native and nonnative speaking instructors of university intermediate French classes when they evaluate compositions; (b) on differences between native and nonnative speakers in the categories where error correction was performed and (c) on differences between native and nonnative speakers as to the content of the compositions.

The third research question was dealt with qualitatively through the analysis of a questionnaire and an interview, as well as through the researcher's interpretation of participants' comments found in the compositions.

The randomly selected compositions were placed into two groups: those corrected by native speakers of French and those corrected by nonnative speakers of French.

The types of error correction present in the data from each group was examined by the researcher—who is a native speaker of French—and by another native speaker of French, using a previously established correction grid. This correction instrument was partially borrowed from Magnan's study on Grammar and the ACTFL Proficiency Interview (1988, p. 270). Magnan (1988) isolated seven grammatical categories which, she explained, are "based on knowledge of French, experience with the areas of student difficulty and experience with OPI testing" (p. 270). The seven error categories selected by Magnan were (1) Verb Conjugation, (2) Tense/Mood, (3) Determiners, (4) Adjectives, (5) Prepositions, (6) Object Pronouns, and (7) Relative Pronouns. Using this framework,[2] Magnan grouped the items into the following four categories: (1) verb-clause error, (2) noun-clause error, (3) spelling error, and (4) pronoun error.

To assess interrater reliability between the researcher and the other native speaker of French, the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was calculated. A correlation of .92 indicated very high interrater reliability.

Design

The design was a 2 (native/non-native) X 2 (low/high) X 4 (number of teachers nested within

the design, a ratio was calculated: the number of errors corrected by the teacher divided by the total number of errors present in each error category. In order to calculate the ratio, the number of errors corrected and the total number of errors present in each composition and in each error category were counted. For example, the number of noun clause errors corrected by the teacher was counted; the number of noun-clause errors not corrected was also tabulated; the total number of noun-clause errors was obtained by adding the number of errors corrected and the number of errors left uncorrected. The procedure was repeated for each subject in each error category.

ANALYSIS

Procedure for Research Question 1

To determine whether or not there were differences in the number of corrections performed by native and nonnative speakers/ instructors of university intermediate French classes when they evaluate compositions, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed on the data, namely, on the percentage of corrected error means.

Procedure for Research Question 2

In order to determine any differences between native and nonnative speakers in the categories where error correction was performed, the researcher ran four ANOVAs, one for each error category. The results of each ANOVA provided F values for each error category under analysis, and therefore indicate in which category or categories the native and nonnative speakers corrected differently.

Procedure for Research Question 3

To determine any differences between native and nonnative speakers when and if they paid attention to content, the following procedure was used. Each participating TA was invited to respond to a questionnaire about pedagogical background and whether or not composition evaluation guidelines had been provided that semester. The participants also provided their own evaluation tools if they had any.

Each participant was also interviewed so as to determine whether they considered all errors marked in the grade and whether they believed all errors marked and considered in the grade to be of equal importance.

A sample questionnaire and a list of the interview questions are presented in Appendices A and B. To determine the answer to Question 3, the researcher read the instructors' comments (if any) on both first and final drafts of the compositions and analyzed the focus of the comments (linguistic accuracy, content, interest, organization, etc.).

RESULTS

Statistical Results

The means of error correction for native and nonnative speakers in each error category and for the

high and low groups are presented in Table 1.

The multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) answered Question 1. The MANOVA is a test of the means presented above. Its results yielded significant $F(1, 124) = 16.960$, $p < .05$ for the main effects of the variable, High/Low, indicating that there were significant differences in the number of errors corrected according to which group (high or low) a composition belonged. In other words, there were differences in the number of corrections according to what grade a composition received.

No significant F values were yielded for the main effects of the variable Native/Nonnative. For the main effects of Native/Nonnative, $F(1, 124) = 1.129$, $p > .05$. The lack of significant value for the main effects of Native/Nonnative can be interpreted as a lack of differences between native and nonnative speakers of French when they corrected the compositions overall.

The answer to the first research question was therefore negative: there were no significant differences between native and nonnative speakers/instructors in the number of errors corrected. However, there were significant differences in the number of errors corrected according to the group, (High or Low), in which the compositions were placed. More errors were corrected in the low group of compositions than in the high group.

Since the main effects of High/Low were significant, univariate F-tests were conducted in order to determine if the effect was significant for all variables. Results are presented in Table 2.

The main effects of High/Low were significant in all error categories. Therefore, it can be concluded that the number of corrections greatly influenced the grade that a composition received. There were significant differences in the number of errors corrected by native and nonnative speakers of French in the High and the Low compositions in all of the error categories. However, since the main effects of Native/Nonnative was not found to be significant, the answer to Research Question 2 was negative; there are no significant differences between native and nonnative speakers of French in the error categories where correction was performed. The results can be to mean that native and nonnative speakers alike corrected more errors in all the error categories in the Low group of compositions than they did in the High group.

Qualitative Results

This section will answer Research Question 3 and is divided into three parts: the questionnaire results, the interview answers, and the comments found on the students' papers.

Questionnaire Results

Of the four native speakers of French, one had completed a course in pedagogy, two had completed more than one course, and one had

Table 1
Native and Nonnative Error Correction Means

	Native			Nonnative		
	High	Low	Average	High	Low	Average
Verb	.43	.85	.64	.50	.63	.57
Noun	.47	.92	.70	.48	.77	.62
Spelling	.37	.68	.53	.36	.69	.54
Pronoun	.63	.89	.76	.62	.69	.65

Table 2
Main Effects of High/Low - Univariate F-Tests with 1, 124 D.F.

Variable	Hyp. SS	ErrorSS	Hyp. MS	ErrorMS	F	Sig. of F
Verb	2.50320	18.3013	2.5032	.14759	16.960*	.000
Noun	4.34019	11.8761	4.3401	.09578	45.316*	.000
Spelling	3.20678	17.9111	3.2067	.14444	22.200*	.000
Pron.	.85969	14.2941	.85969	.11528	7.4576*	.007

no experience in pedagogy. Of the four native speakers of English, three had done one course in pedagogy, and one had more than one course. None of the participants of the study was majoring or minoring in pedagogy. None of the TAs had been given formal guidelines pertaining to composition correction. Three of the four native speakers of French and three of the four native speakers of English indicated they had devised their own personal guidelines.

Interview Answers

Three native speakers of French and three native speakers of English reported that they did not take into consideration all the errors marked on the student's paper when they awarded the grade. One native speaker of French and one native speaker of English indicated that they did count all errors when they awarded the grade. All participants reported that they did not consider all errors to be of equal significance.

Instructors' Comments

Generally speaking, nonnative speakers of French made very few comments on the papers. If they did, their comments focused primarily on grammatical accuracy. None of the comments emphasized content, interest, originality, or organization, in any specific ways.

In general, native speakers made more comments on the students' work than did the nonnatives, but their comments remained as focused as the nonnative speakers' comments on students' linguistic accuracy. There was the one exception of one native speaker of French who asked questions about actual meaning. The answer to Research Question 3 is therefore negative. There were no differences between native and nonnative speakers of French in the area of content.

DISCUSSION

The results of the MANOVA yielded no significant differences between native and nonnative speakers of French in the number of corrections they performed in the High and Low groups of compositions.

The fact that native speakers of French corrected as many mistakes as did nonnative speakers in the Low compositions was surprising. The researcher's hypothesis, based on prior studies (Politzer, 1978; Davies, 1983; Magnan, 1982; Green & Hecht, 1985; Kobayashi, 1992; and Takashima, 1987) was that nonnative speakers of French would correct more mistakes than native speakers. In the studies mentioned above, native speakers tended to show more leniency toward errors than did nonnatives. Only one previous study by Ensz, (1982) showed that native speakers of French tended to correct more oral production errors than nonnative speakers. Perhaps, then, this behavior is particular to native speakers of French. It has been said that the French are very protective and possessive of their language. In fact, Ensz (1982) concluded that—

> While an American accent and some Anglicisms may be moderately tolerated, American speakers of French should be most concerned that they speak with the greatest possible grammatical accuracy. (137-138)

Perhaps correcting errors made by learners is an example of this behavior.

Native and nonnative speakers corrected more errors in the Low compositions than they did in the High group in all of the error categories; however, the results showed no differences between native and nonnative speakers of French in these categories. Therefore, the finding indicates that the nonnative speakers of French were as competent as native speakers when identifying grammatical mistakes.

The interview answers pertaining to which errors the participants counted in the grade show very little consistency with what was found when examining the compositions. More than one native

speaker and one nonnative speaker seemed to count all errors marked on the paper in the grade. In the margins of the student composition, they had clearly written "1/2" for each error identified. Equally puzzling was the finding that more than three of the participants seemed to consider all errors marked on the paper to be of equal importance. Their grading system resembled the above-mentioned formula. The inconsistencies found between what the participants disclosed of their grading systems and what happened in reality seem to show that the participants may think that they were following a specific correction pattern, but they in fact were not.

One of the very interesting results provided by the questionnaire was that none of the participants had been given formal guidelines pertaining to composition evaluation. It appears that this area of foreign language instruction was somewhat neglected and left up to each individual.

Equally interesting was the finding that out of the eight TAs, two (one native and one nonnative speaker of French) had no personal guidelines for the evaluation of compositions. All other participants had devised their own systems. They were largely based on linguistic accuracy, whether the TA was a native speaker of French or not.

Another striking finding upon examining the compositions was the virtual absence of instructors' comments. Most of the compositions were returned to the students bare of any feedback, negative or positive. The great majority of rough drafts bore no comments at all. Those which did had been corrected by native speakers of French, and then again, the main focus of the comments were on length, linguistic accuracy, and only once were there comments on content.

Final drafts also showed very few comments. However, there was a difference between native and nonnative speakers of French in the quantity of the comments they wrote. Overall, native speakers wrote significantly more on students' compositions than nonnatives did. Nonnative speakers' comments focused primarily on grammatical accuracy. So did the comments written by three of the native speakers of French. However, one native speaker commented on meaning and content as well as stylistics.

The general lack of comments was in complete disagreement with current research (Semke, 1984); Omaggio, 1993; Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1988) in writing and error correction. This research recommends that instructors evaluate compositions not only for their grammatical components, but also and most importantly for their content. The data gathered and examined here showed that native and nonnative speakers of French alike still viewed writing very much as a form-driven act.

CONCLUSIONS

Students' compositions in the target language are examples of in-

terlanguage at work. They contain many mistakes in linguistic accuracy. As recent studies demonstrate, the systematic correction of all mistakes does not necessarily aid students in acquiring grammatical structures; however, a certain degree of attention must be paid to errors in accuracy. Just how much attention must be devoted to those errors remains to be determined. This research was conducted in hopes that it could help define more precise indicators as to what kinds of errors should be corrected. If the primary goal of language learning is to be able to communicate with native speakers of a given language, then the question is, What do native speakers of French consider serious errors?

Most Important Error Categories

Judging from the results, all error categories (verb, noun, spelling, and pronoun) were given a great deal of attention. It appears that native speakers of French behave as "intolerantly," or at least identify as many mistakes in these categories, as do nonnatives.

Composition Content

While the majority of the participants stated in the questionnaire that they graded compositions both on grammatical accuracy and content, none of them actually made any comments as to whether the essays were interesting or not, original or unimaginative, or whether they were well or poorly organized.

It appears that, in spite of what current research recommends as far as composition correction is concerned, instructors continue to pay attention solely to the grammatical component of their students' compositions.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The implications that can be drawn from the results of the present study touch on three areas: TA preparation, error correction, and classroom instruction. The lack of knowledge on composition correction can be interpreted as a lack of knowledge on testing in general. Foreign language teachers are expected to create tests almost on a daily basis without any knowledge of test construct, of devising rubrics, of setting criteria and of grading the tests. Methods courses must emphasize not only teaching but also testing, and such courses must prepare our teachers to design good essay type tests with accompanying rubrics and grading criteria.

Another area of concern deals with interlanguage. Compositions, especially at the early stages of language proficiency, will contain samples of interlanguage, therefore, our profession needs to address the many kinds of foreign language learner interlanguage mappings. Such studies, as Garrett (1991) suggested need to concentrate on interlanguage as presented in contextualized and communicative writing samples.

NOTES:

1. In Green and Hecht's study (1985), sixty German students (aged 15) wrote replies in English to English letters of elicitation. Each letter was graded by three German teachers of English and five native speakers of English, all of them teachers (three taught English, one foreign languages, and another physics). Forty-six native speakers of English (all students) also wrote replies to the same letters of elicitation. Each letter was graded by two native speakers of English (other than the five native speakers mentioned previously) who also taught English. The letters written by native speakers of English served as the authenticity check for the task. Overall, there was a large measure of disagreement over errors between the native and the nonnative speaking groups and a very low interrater reliability.
2. The seven categories developed by Magnan (1988) were collapsed into four in this study because, after looking at the collected data, the researcher realized that the students' writing did not contain much sophistication in several areas such as verb tense/mood, object pronouns, prepositions, and relative pronouns.

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APPENDIX A
QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Please indicate if you are a native or nonnative speaker of French.
   __ native __nonnative

2. Please indicate if you are a native or nonnative speaker of English.
   __ native __nonnative

3. If you are both a nonnative speaker of French and English, please indicate your native language(s).

4. What is your formal training in pedagogy (if any)?

   _____ none

   _____ one course

   _____ more than one course

   _____ it is your minor area of specialization

   _____ it is your minor area of specialization

5. Were you given any formal guidelines pertaining to the correction of compositions this semester?
   __ yes __ no

6. If you answered yes to question #5, please indicate the guidelines you received.

7. If you answered no to question #5, please indicate whether you had personal guidelines.
   __ yes __ no

8. If you answered yes to question #7, please indicate what your guidelines were. What criteria did you use in correcting your students' compositions? (i.e. grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, etc.)

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. When you grade/correct compositions, are all errors marked considered in the grade a student receives? In other words, do all errors marked on the student's paper count in the grade?
   __ yes __ no, explain:

2. When you grade/correct compositions, are all errors marked and considered in the grade of equal importance and weight in the grade? In other words, do all errors marked and considered in the grade weigh the same amount in the grade?
   __ yes __ no, explain:

3. Please indicate whether you are:

_ a native speaker of French
_ _ a nonnative speaker of French